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ABSTRACT

A successful, flexible, system for coordinating volunteers in the Meigs, Ohio, local school district's elementary schools utilizes a file box containing the names of aides selected to participate in the volunteer program, the times and days they are available, and the services they can provide. A teacher needing a volunteer to perform certain duties at specific times selects the aide who best meets his/her needs according to time and performance. By selecting and notifying the volunteer prior to the specified time (usually two days), the teacher secures from the volunteer a commitment to fulfill the teacher's classroom or clerical needs. Utilization of the file box system at each school is the responsibility of the building coordinator. A central coordinator maintains a central file box system to accommodate volunteers who are capable of making a contribution or have talents of value to more than one school site. Arrangements are made to secure the services of a multi-site volunteer by request to the central coordinator. The volunteer program at each school is conducted at a ready room--a central gathering place where volunteers may be obtained by teachers when they are needed. The ready room is staffed by volunteers whose duties are primarily clerical but who are able to provide instructional assistance if needed. The room is equipped with duplicating machines, typewriters, and work tables. (MM)

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THE FILE BOX SYSTEM: FLEXIBILITY IN A VOLUNTEER AIDE PROGRAM

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In the Meigs Local School District, a rural southeastern Ohio school district, a volunteer aide program is currently in existence in the district's elementary schools. This program was initiated in cooperation with the Ohio University Teacher Corps Project which also operates within the school district.

The developers of the Meigs Volunteer Program (MVP) were acutely aware of the factors which customarily undermine most volunteer aide programs and they sought to design a program devoid of these problems. Such a program has been devised, and the authors of this article believe that utilization of a single procedure is primarily responsible for any of the success which MVP has thus far attained.

The aforementioned factor is called a "file box" system. The system derives its name from the place (a file box) in which the names of aides are stored. From this resource pool, teachers and school district administrators can select the individual with whom they would like to work on a given day. Underlying the system is the belief that a volunteer program achieves optimum results when an elementary teacher determines the times a volunteer is to be used in her classroom, which aide is to be utilized, and the type(s) of service(s) to be provided by the volunteer in the elementary classroom.

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How does the system work? The names of those individuals selected to participate in the volunteer program are cross-referenced in a file box according to the times and days they are available and the services which they can provide. A teacher, needing a volunteer to perform certain duties at specified times, selects the aide who best meets her needs according to time and performance. By selecting and notifying the volunteer (approximately two days) prior to the specified time, the teacher secures from the volunteer a commitment to fulfill the teacher's classroom or clerical needs.

Utilization of the file box system at each elementary school is the responsibility of the building coordinator. She coordinates efforts between teachers and volunteers, and insures that teachers indicate the name of a volunteer from whom they have secured a commitment, so that individual's name is eliminated from the "available" list for those particular times and days. In addition, the building coordinator "checks in" volunteers when they enter a school site and "checks out" aides when they leave the elementary school. This enables the coordinator to know not only when a volunteer is being utilized in the elementary school but also the degree to which the aide is being used weekly. This information has a certain degree of diagnostic value, as it enables the building coordinator to ascertain which volunteers are providing services and why other aides are not being used. Those volunteers not being utilized may be inserviced (or remediated) to correct possible reasons for their non-use.

In order to accomodate those volunteers who: (1) wished to make themselves available at more than one school site; and/or, (2) were capable of making a contribution or had talents which were of value to more than one school site, the file box system was expanded. This

expansion necessitated that a central coordinator be used to augment the efforts of the building coordinator. These multi-site volunteers are a part of each school's file box system as well as part of a "central" file box system. Arrangements are made by the teacher to secure the services of a multi-site volunteer by a request to the central coordinator or by asking her building coordinator to do so.

Efforts at each school site are conducted at a prearranged room, whether that be a central office or a "ready room." The ready room concept is another effort to expand the file box system. Sometimes the spontaneity of classroom activities may create a situation in which the teacher needs immediate instructional help. Since the teacher had not planned that help would be needed, she may be at a loss when instructional help would be beneficial to augment the learning of the children in the classroom. The establishment of a ready room would avoid this situation.

The ready room can be staffed by volunteers whose duties would be primarily clerical but who would be able to provide instructional assistance to teachers as the need arises. The ready room is equipped with duplicating machines, typewriters, and work tables in which volunteers can complete any clerical duties assigned them. It is also a central "gathering" place where volunteers may be obtained by teachers when they are needed. Volunteers assigned to the ready room must necessarily be available for greater periods of time in order to effectively staff the ready room.

An additional point should be made concerning the file box system. A situation may arise wherein a teacher and volunteer find that they work together so well that they wish to make their classroom partnership

more permanent. When such a case arises, the volunteer may be entirely removed from the file box system, and all of her time is given to a particular teacher or just removed on those times and days when the permanent schedule is in effect.

Since the overwhelming majority of school districts use aides on a fixed time schedule (the volunteer is to be in attendance at the same site on certain specified times and days each week), a comparison between this regimented mode of scheduling and the file box system is in order. The authors of this article contend the latter is superior for at least three reasons. They are:

1. With a fixed time schedule, the volunteer is expected to be at a school site during specified time periods each week. This creates two major problems: (a) the lack of scheduling flexibility prohibits some individuals from becoming aides; and, (b) during certain time periods, the elementary teacher has no real need for a volunteer, thereby creating a situation wherein the teacher must do extra preparation and planning so as to provide "something" for the aide to do.

   The aforementioned situations can be avoided by implementation of a file box system. This system affords flexibility to both the prospective aide and the teacher. The volunteer can offer her services in accordance with her weekly schedule, and the teacher can request (and have) a volunteer when she knows beforehand that an aide is needed for certain classroom or clerical activity.

2. A fixed schedule usually requires that teachers and volunteers be matched according to personalities and duties. A

teacher and a volunteer must be able to coexist in the classroom; therefore, it is essential that their personalities be compatible. Additionally, the needs of the teacher must be matched to the duties the volunteer is able to carry out. In both cases, with the fixed schedule, the complex decisions involved with the matchups are made with the hope that they will be functional and are usually made by someone other than the teacher.

With the file box system, decisions concerning possible matchups of teachers and volunteers are made by the teacher. Since the teacher is responsible for the activities of the volunteer, the teacher, not some other person, should be involved in selecting the person with whom she is to work and the type of duties which the volunteer will perform in the classroom. Involving the teacher in this decision-making process is essential to the success of the volunteer program. Moreover, this teacher-selecting process provides additional safeguards against volunteers that could possibly hinder the educational process; i.e. teachers will not select volunteers who will not do a good job for them, are not reliable, or are harmful to their children.

3. Finally, the file box system enhances one area which is of primary concern to the success of any volunteer program -- dependability. It is essential that the volunteer be dependable. The volunteer, when asked to perform certain duties, must be depended upon to complete them, and at the time when they are asked to be completed. Putting a volunteer, who is unpaid, on a fixed schedule wherein she is bound to definite time commit-

ments, may provide a situation in which the volunteer may not be able to consistently keep that schedule.

The file box system creates a situation in which a teacher indicates she needs the help of a volunteer. It is not presumptuous to say that the volunteer, aware that she is needed at a school site, will try to fulfill that commitment with a higher efficiency rate than a volunteer who is just expected to be at the school site at certain times on certain days. Many problems inherent in the dependability of volunteers can be eliminated when the volunteer knows she is really needed, especially when the volunteer knows that the request was made by a teacher who is aware of, and respects her competence.

CONCLUSION

A final note should be made on the file box system. Just as with any system involving large numbers of people, it is not foolproof and certainly has faults. However, the flexibility that such a design can provide a school system in the planning and implementation of a volunteer program is invaluable. The more flexibility inherent in a volunteer aide program, the greater the chances are that it will succeed!

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